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Cc: []

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By TENNILLE TRACY

The Environmental Protection Agency said new government tests of groundwater near Pavillion, Wyo., have yielded results similar to data it released last year, when it suggested chemicals in the water were linked to hydraulic fracturing.

The EPA's contention was dismissed by Encana Corp., ECA.T +0.14% the natural-gas company operating in the area, which said the EPA was still offering a "flawed" interpretation of test results.

The new findings were released Wednesday by the U.S. Geological Survey, which tested water from one of two monitoring wells the EPA drilled after Pavillion residents started to voice concern years ago about the smell and taste of their water. The agency dug the two wells, both hundreds of feet deep, to test the area for signs of contamination.

Encana and natural-gas industry supporters said the wells were drilled into a natural-gas reservoir, which was why the agency found components of natural gas.

Wednesday's findings come after the EPA issued a draft report last December, saying it found chemicals in both wells that appeared to come from hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, the drilling technique credited with helping spur a boom in U.S. natural-gas production. Critics accused the EPA of jumping to conclusions before seeking the input of outside experts.

The EPA has said it would review comments and concerns before releasing a final report.

The EPA agreed to retest the Pavillion wells earlier this year. The agency hasn't yet completed its analysis of Pavillion's water and outside experts say it is too early to draw definitive conclusions from either the USGS data or the agency's draft report. The USGS presented its findings as raw data, leaving it to EPA and others to interpret them.

The EPA said USGS results are "generally consistent" with its data.

The USGS said it declined to test the water in one of the two EPA monitoring wells because the volume of water flow wasn't high enough to get good readings—relying on the other well for the tests.

"This goes to the heart of concerns raised by state and federal agencies, as well as Encana: EPA's wells are improperly constructed," Encana spokesman Doug Hock said.

Fracking opponents say the procedure poses a risk to the country's drinking-water supplies and should be regulated more strictly, if not stopped altogether. The natural-gas industry says fracking is safe as long as drilling is done correctly.

The EPA has repeatedly stressed that conditions in Pavillion are different from many other areas of the country because the fracking took place in and below the drinking-water aquifer and in proximity to wells that provide drinking water. President Barack Obama has voiced strong support for natural-gas production and says the industry can create jobs.

With a population of about 230 people, Pavillion has become an epicenter in a broader debate over fracking, in which energy companies pump a high-pressure mix of water, sand and chemicals into the ground to break open seams in the earth and unlock natural gas trapped inside.

Report leaves debate open on contested Wyoming fracking study

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Ayesha RascoeReuters

7:00 p.m. CDT, September 26, 2012

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The government on Wednesday released the latest water quality results from a Wyoming aquifer that federal regulators said was contaminated by natural gas drilling, but the data will likely do little quiet debate on the cause of the polluted groundwater.

While the United States Geological Survey report included raw data from samples it collected from a well near Pavillion, Wyoming, in April and May, the agency did not provide any analysis, leaving the information open to varying conclusions.

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"Interpretation was not part of the scope of the report," USGS spokesman Dave Ozman said.

Pavillion, Wyoming was thrust into the national spotlight late last year when the Environmental Protection Agency released a draft report finding that hydraulic fracturing fluids used in natural gas drilling likely polluted groundwater in the area.

The report contradicted arguments by gas drillers that fracking fluids have never contaminated drinking water.

Advances in hydraulic fracturing, which involves injecting water, sand and chemicals underground to extract fuel, have unlocked vast shale gas resources across the nation.

Environmental groups have called for more federal regulation of fracking and some for an outright ban, saying it pollutes the air and taints groundwater.

In response to criticism from the oil and gas industry and Wyoming officials, the EPA agreed to work with the state government and the USGS to retest the water before issuing its final analysis.

The data released by the USGS on Wednesday "is generally consistent with ground water monitoring data previously released by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for the Pavillion, Wyoming area," the EPA said in statement on Wednesday.

The EPA will soon release additional data it collected from the wells. Once finalized, the information from the EPA and the USGS will be submitted to for independent peer review.

Encana Corp, a Canadian company that owns the gas field near Pavillion, said there was "nothing surprising" about the data released on Wednesday.

Doug Hock, an Encana spokesman, said the main area of dispute is the conclusions drawn from the data.

Encana, which has raised concerns about the adequacy of the EPA's monitoring of wells, pointed out that the USGS was only able to sample one of the two wells.

"This goes to the heart of concerns raised by state and federal agencies, as well as Encana - EPA's wells are improperly constructed," Hock said in a statement.

The USGS said it did not sample the second well because it was not able to apply the same method it used for the first well.